

## [The Iron Ring]

III.

### FOLKLORE

- May Swenson

- Anca Vrbovska THE IRON RING

Well, the time came when the workers just up and decided to slow down those clocks. You know, a speed-up is hard on the employees in any company. But in Postal Tel of ACA it means squeezing into a minute what would ordinarily take two minutes. The clocks keep tab on you for every instant lost, and you gotta keep up, or else. It looked like the company expected to make robots of us, but they forgot one thing. That even robots will organize.....

(Joe Timms talking. She is a stout clear-eyed woman, ACA Union organizer, New York Irish to the core. Worked many years in Postal Tel and was active as a rank and file leader in forming the union..... Place: Postal Tel Union Hall....)

We 'robots' got together and ganged up on the clocks. One slogan we had was "Postal Tel is BEHIND TIME; Others organize, why not we?" We began to press for a slow-down.

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One thing we hit was the 'merit system' set up by the bosses. Only we called it the ' de merit system'. Here's how it worked. The boss set a quota for each worker. You had to send a certain number of messages in an hour and paste up a certain number. If you were short one you lost five points. If you were one over, you gained five points. Then you lost merits for lateness, absence, errors and so on. Then according to your merits you were shifted around. You know, it's a thirty-four hour job, and there are three shifts. The boss

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would add up your merits, and every three months you'd be shifted according to how good your record was. So those that had the most merits got first pick on what shift they wanted. The catch was that nothing was said about higher wages no / [?] matter how high your merits stacked up.

The idea was to make the workers speed up and compete with each other. It was tough going. The nature of the work is strenuous anyhow, and the speed-up just about knocked hell out of some of the younger kids. We got a larger percentage of operators reporting ill from month to month. Tension on the job increased. The place resembled an ant heap that'd been set afire.

Even the supers became irritable and nervous and would pick at the workers more and more to keep up their quotas. Well, you can't blame them — they all got fed up — and the result was Strike.

Our little union began to pick up in membership and we staged demonstrations trying to feel out the company on its future policies. If the speed-up was going to be a permanent thing, we were out to break it, even at the cost of some of our jobs. We organized picket lines, made up songs and slogans to shout — oh, lots of them. For instance, like this: Put on your ACA bonnet Pin your union card on it For we demonstrate today Put a shine on your brogans And practice up your slogans For that's the union way Put on your union button And then start struttin' Cause we're gonna join the C I O We'll fight for higher wages And increase them through the ages With the C - I; C - I - O

As it turned out we did team up with the CIO, and after that the sledding was easier. The union grew till we had about five thousand with us in branch companies throughout the country.

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And we kept recruiting right and left. There was an old song someone made up to the tune of Tipperary — went like this: It's a good thing to join the union It's a fine place to go It's a

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good thing to join the union And march with the CIO Goodbye to the speed-up Hello, union pay Rally Postal workers for the ACA

And another, sung to the tune of Glory, Glory Hallelujah: It is we who lay the wires, it is we who make them hum It is we who keep united every land beneath the sun Yet how miserably they've paid us for the wondrous work we've done But the union makes us strong Solidarity for ever, solidarity for ever Solidarity for ever, For the union makes us strong

Well, we built up an organization with plenty of spunk and it looked like inside of six months we'd have the right stuff to go over the top with. Of course, here and there you'd find a sceptic or two — fellows who'd had their noses against the grind stone for so many years, it seemed the only natural thing — and they joined line union just to get in good with the rest. On the whole, we had very little trouble with scabs, though — the issue was too obviously in our favor. Even the bosses had to admit we had a sound argument, even if they kept stalling us for a while. About this time, we got a little paper going - the ACA NEWS, where we printed contributions of workers and union news. There was propaganda for and against the strike. We let the workers have their say. We thought it was a good idea for them to get any opinions, doubts or grudges off their chest before the big fight started. Here's a few of the things which appeared. This'll give you a cross-section of the average ACA worker's outlook around that time.

From the column, PERSONAL AND IMPERSONAL by Wiretapper:

.....'We notice a bulletin in the ladies room which makes us wonder if O'Keefe is a racing man. But we guess not. This notice refers to keeping stalls clean. Apparently O'Keefe thinks of his female staff as horses. He sure can drive them!

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One of the [???] operators said the other day: "I feel so lousy that I think I'll spend my overtime money on a down payment on a tombstone!"

And did you hear this one: "It's terribly warm in here," complains one op to [an?] a supervisor. No answer. "Say, it's awfully warm in here. I feel so hot, I think I'll faint." "Oh," says the supervisor, "you're loafing, eh. Because if you were working hard 6 you wouldn't know the difference." ....You sure would if you worked in a union shop, sister....

....

WHICH ARE YOU? Are you an active member The kind that would be missed Or are you just contented That your name is on the list? Do you attend the meetings And mingle with the flock Or do you stay at home And criticize and knock Do you take an active part To help the work along Or are you satisfied To be the kind that just belong? ....

I SIT ON THE FENCE I enjoy a good fight; it's a wonderful sight Providing I'm not in the fray I'm a peaceable soul who prefers his skin whole So I sit on the fence and survey. I sit on the fence and I gaze from thence At the fighters who fight in the fray. If the company wins, my hide will be safe And I value my hide I must say. If the union is best, I'll cheer with the rest And accept the raise in pay I'll hop off the fence to count my pence Then I'll hop on again and survey! I'm a generous soul, and it's ever my goal To have plenty of cheers to spare I'm sure they go nice with my kind of advice Which is commonly called 'Hot Air' So I sit on the fence with attention tense and watch the battle veering If the company wins, in spite of its sins You'll surely find me cheering But if the union men are victors, then You will hear my wild 'Hurray!' As I hop off the fence to show my good sense Ere I hop on again and survey! 7 For what is the use or where's the excuse To put my epidermis in danger? I have always known that my skin is my own And not the skin of a stranger. So I sit on the fence, and my din is intense For there I can holler and see And whichever side wins, you'll know by my grins That the winner was backed by me. When the last shot is fired

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and my tonsils are tired And the wounded are carried away I'll hop off the fence with valor  
immense Then I'll hop on again and survey! ....

### NO FAIRY STORY

Once upon a time, not so long ago, a man went hunting in the woods. He was miles away from any shelter, when a storm of terrific proportions broke out.

Looking for some sort of covering, the man spied a hollow log and crawled into it, safely protected from the elements without.

After some hours the storm died down. Upon attempting to leave, however, the man found to his horror that the log had swollen with the rain and he had become tightly wedged within it.

With death from slow starvation staring him gauntly in the face, the hunter began to review his life. Many were the images he conjured up out of the past. He thought of his happy childhood, his youth, his lovely wife. Bitterly he cursed the cruel fate that had handed him down to such a death.

Suddenly he remembered that he had not paid his ACA dues.

The reaction was immediate and startling — it made him feel so small that he crawled out of the log with ease.

Pay your dues today!

.....

SLOW DOWN On the 24th of October at 8 A. M. We put,the company in a jam We refused to be speeded or hurried a bit And the company officials were having a fit They ran to the office and back out again They The way they were worried was really a sin 8 Tape hung

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from the machines like grapes from a vine And for once in the office we could really recline.  
This hasn't ended, but shortly it must For if it doesn't, the company we'll bust.

..... Things began to tighten up around the fall of 1937. We had been negotiating with the company for recognition of our union, but they were still holding out on us. We were in close touch with every union in Postal Telegraph companies throughout the Eastern chain — and they all looked ripe for a strike. I'll tell you — a funny thing about this strike that's different from the ordinary workers' fight for better conditions — the main element was really this: We were striking against time, against that damning dictation day in and day out by the clock. The Postal speed-up (you gotta understand) was like no other speed-up. Like I said before, it meant literally splitting seconds — and that meant splitting the nerves of the workers. Of course, we realized that the sending and receiving of wires is a job that's got to reckon with the time element first of all. Sure. But our quarrel was with the clocks just the same. There was no reason for speeding us up to double quick time. There is a difference between flesh and metal, between the human heart and the wheels of a clock. So we decided to slow down the clocks. Reminds me of a jingle somebody wrote... Hickory dickory dock Let's stop the Postal clock The clock strikes one And We'll strike too! Hickory dickory dock Hickory dickory doss let's dicker with the boss If he says 'No' Then we'll say 'Go!' We'll strike, and that's his loss Hickory dickory hey We'll strike for better pay Slow the speed-up, boost our pay That's the union way Hickory dickory heck We want a fatter check Treat us fair, Boss; meet us square, Boss Or else stick out your neck!

Well, the boss did stick out his neck. And we put an iron ring right around it. Here's how it worked. By November we had companies in six principle Eastern cities roped in on the strike campaign: Washington, Philly, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Buffalo and New York. These cities happen to be strung in a half circle on the map — like this:

(Include here drawing of U.S. map — in files) And they virtually control the communications industry throughout the country. All messages going East, West, North or South have to be relayed through one of those points. So that pulling a stand-up

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in every one of those cities simultaneously meant locking the wires from coast to coast. We called it the Iron Ring. The strike action itself we had timed to the minute. That part was easy. It was done by slipping code signals through on the wires to all six points, and agreeing on the exact time for the stand-up to begin.

Up to the last minute the workers didn't know just where or when action would start, not even the executive committees in the shops. But the workers had voted the National Office the power to call the strike, and they were on their toes, ready for the whistle at any hour of the day or night. # On November 21, 1937 at exactly one p. m., E. S. T., the union organizer stepped on to the floor in the Pittsburgh shop and blew a whistle. Every union operator there immediately flashed this message at the bottom of whatever message he was sending:

STOP STOP STOP ACA STAND UP FOR BETTER CONDITIONS

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And they stood up. The workers at other points, receiving the message a couple seconds later, sent it on, and then stood up at their machines. One minute, and the message had flashed all over the country, and the strike was on. [1] It lasted three hours and twenty minutes. During those three hours the wire traffic was cut by eighty-five to ninety per cent from coast to coast. The company bosses rushed around frantically issuing orders to resume. but But they soon found out that Iron Ring was hard to break.

The strike committees went into conference with the bosses, and meanwhile, 15,000 workers, following the strike schedule, mobilized in the lunch rooms or recreation halls, and made a little private whoopee. There was no disorder though. A police squad of workers was appointed to see that no one left the premises, and that no one tampered with equipment or abused company property. The strikers danced or played cards, made up songs and sang them. It was a three-hour holiday. # When our committee returned to the lunch room with the results of negotiations, we had a victory song ready, and

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somebody had got hold of some old horseshoes to hang round their necks instead of laurel wreaths wreaths.

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The good news was that line working day, would be cut one hour, that the speed-up was busted, that we'd be allowed a closed shop and full recognition of our union. A couple fellows pulled out mouth organs and the rest of us lammed into it [?] to the tune of The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down: Postal Tel said No They hadn't any dough But ACA came queered the/ir game Oh, hear those whistles blow! Oh, Mr. G\_\_\_\_\_ broke down He met us with a frown We had some fun before we'd done Oh, Mr. G\_\_\_\_\_ broke down We will make the old Postal pay For all the years that they had their way Oh, the CIO has won We have them on the run The Postal Tel can go to h\_\_\_\_\_ The CIO has won!

Then the whistle was blown again to mark the end of the stand-up. The workers went back to their machines, and there, first thing they did was flash returns of the strike to all points participating: POSTAL TELEGRAPH WORKERS WIN BETTER PAY BETTER CONDITIONS CIO UNION RECOGNIZED STOP TAKE YOUR SEAT

Well, that was once we stopped the clocks. For three hours.